

MERCHANTS MILLPOND STATE PARK

PARK PROFILE

PARK PURPOSE STATEMENT

The millpond, first known as Norfleets Millpond, was formed when Bennetts Creek was impounded to serve a grist and sawmill in 1811. The millpond became known as Merchants Millpond in the early 1900s when the mill became the county's chief trading center. Mill operations ceased shortly before World War II. After two attempts to develop the surrounding property failed, A. B. Coleman purchased the property in the 1960s. Merchants Millpond State Park was established in 1973 when Coleman donated over 1,000 acres to the state to protect the area's natural diversity.

The park contains many significant biological resources representative of a coastal millpond and southern swamp, including an exceptionally rich aquatic flora. The swamp upstream from the pond is an excellent example of a blackwater stream that supports several types of swamp forest. Several old-growth stands of cypress-gum forests with Spanish moss and resurrection ferns dominate the pond and provide a canopy over its dark, acidic waters. A Mesic Mixed Hardwood Forest, dominated by beech, is located on the slopes adjacent to the millpond. The park supports an abundant faunal community, including many species requiring large tracts of wildland for survival. Approximately 1,900 acres have been designated as the Merchants Millpond Registered Natural Heritage Area. An unusual feature of the millpond is the thick scattering of massive stumps within the millpond itself, habitats for complex micro-ecosystems. Many plant species are at or near the limits of their range, with mountain species and northern species coexisting with the typical southern varieties.

Merchants Millpond has a variety of exceptional and unusual scenic resources. Opportunities exist to get out on the pond and view wildlife while paddling in an ecological wonderland. Lassiter Swamp, with its large cypress trees shrouded in Spanish moss, is like an enchanted forest, with a pristine beauty and allure to be appreciated and admired. The swamp's beauty, serenity, and peacefulness, along with its wonders of nature, provide an increased awareness and appreciation of a swamp environment.

The park's significant archaeological resource is the cultural history of the millpond. Early Gates residents were dependent upon farming and logging for their livelihoods. Thus, mills were constructed to process and market the farm products and lumber. With all the mercantile activity at the mills, this area soon became the trade center of Gates County.

The park's significant recreational resources include the millpond's natural character and some adjacent land suitable for limited development. The millpond provides a rare opportunity to experience near-wilderness conditions in a swamp environment. Canoeing the swamp provides solitude and a sense of discovery and exploration, with the quiet and tranquillity interrupted only by the sounds of the wildlife. The millpond size and placid conditions create excellent fishing opportunities as well as canoe-in camping accessible to novice boaters. Surrounding high ground is suitable for drive-in camping and picnicking. The park's extensive trail system provides opportunities to study and photograph nature, and also provides access to backpack camping areas.

The park's most significant geological resources are the upland ridges around the millpond that are atypical in the Coastal Plain. The short steep slopes occurring near the edge of Bennetts Creek are more similar to those found in the Piedmont.

Merchants Millpond was established as a state park so that its diverse biological, scenic, archaeological, geological, and recreational values could be protected. The Division of Parks and Recreation is charged with preserving these values and providing park experiences that promote pride in and understanding of North Carolina's natural heritage.

PRIMARY INTERPRETIVE THEMES

The Millpond: This theme focuses on the diversity of plant types and communities at the millpond, particularly the swamp forest. It also focuses on the millpond's animal communities and cultural history. A special emphasis is placed on the hydrology of the millpond and its water quality.

Plant Communities: This theme focuses on the diversity of plant species and natural community types associated with the millpond. The three prominent communities are the millpond, swamp, and upland (especially the unique beech/mixed hardwood areas). This theme also emphasizes the rare and endangered species and communities found in the park.

Scenic Value: This theme focuses on the significant wild beauty of the millpond-swamp communities and on dispelling the myths of such communities being dark, gloomy, nasty, stagnant places.

STATISTICS

Visitation (1999)	81,864
Operating Budget (FY 98-99)	\$ 300,740
Revenue (FY 98-99)	\$ 41,187

VISITOR FACILITIES

Primitive camping (5 sites, 3 mile hike to sites)	Primitive group camping (3 sites)
Canoe-in camping (7 sites)	Canoe-in group camping (3 sites)
Tent & trailer camping (20 sites, showers, no hookups)	Drinking water
Picnic areas (28 tables) and 1 shelter	Concession area
Boat access	Lake fishing
Canoe rental (32 canoes)	2 Canoe trails (1.5 miles total)
3 Hiking trails (9 miles total)	

CONSTRUCTION AND RENOVATION NEEDS

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| 1 | The visitor center project includes removal of the interpretive trailer, construction of a standard visitor center with exhibits and dioramas, 40-car parking lot, main gate and sign, extension of water and electric lines, an outdoor education space, 3800 sq. ft. of internal connector road, and revisions of 3 intersections. | \$ 2,858,468 |
| 2 | The maintenance area improvements project includes construction of a 1500 sq. ft. warehouse, 1200 sq. ft. vehicle storage building, 400 sq. ft. lumber shed, flammable storage building, paved building aprons, and utility lines. | 376,049 |

3	The ranger residence project demolishes the Morris House and constructs a new, standard, 1560 sq. ft. residence along with 200 ft. of water and electric line extension, paved driveway, and landscaping.	200,254
4	The trails, bridges, and boardwalks project constructs the 1.7 mi. Coleman Trail extension and the 0.6 mi. West Side Trail, several small bridges, approximately 4400 ft. of boardwalks, and a campground connector trail.	794,946
5	The campground expansion project constructs a 1800 sq. ft. loop road, 18 new campsites, a small toilet building, a septic system, and water and electric line extension.	456,796
TOTAL:		<hr/> \$ 4,686,513

REGISTERED NATURAL HERITAGE AREA

Merchants Millpond Registered Natural Heritage Area: This area covers 1,900 acres and includes the millpond and part of Lassiter Swamp. The site's significant features include old growth cypress and gum stands, a well developed beech-dominated upland forest, and the state champion water tupelo tree. The site is a high quality remnant of the once vast coastal plain swamps and supports a number of notable plant and animal species, including a wide variety of aquatic and wetland species. The Natural Heritage Program has identified three natural community types in this area: 1. Coastal Plain Semipermanent Impoundment; 2. Coastal Plain Small Stream Swamp (Blackwater Subtype); and 3. Mesic Mixed Hardwood Forest (Coastal Plain Subtype).

FUTURE LAND ACQUISITION NEEDS

Completion of the Merchants Millpond State Park master plan will require the acquisition of 688 acres. High priority acquisitions include areas for the protection of Lassiter Swamp and the water quality of the millpond as well as upland areas for facility development.

Master Plan Total Acreage	3,940 acres
Current Park Acreage	<u>3,252 acres</u>
Acquisition Needs	688 acres

1999 STAFF POSITIONS

Permanent		Seasonal		Peak Load	
Park Superintendent II	1	General Utility Worker	3	Park Attendant	6
Park Ranger II	2			Office Assistant II	1
Park Ranger I	1				
Maintenance Mechanic II	1				
General Utility Worker	1				
Office Assistant III	1				

PROPOSED STAFF ADDITIONS

Permanent		Seasonal		Peak Load	
Park Ranger III	1	General Utility Worker	2		
General Utility Worker	1				
Office Assistant III	1				